

Truth Or

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Truth Or

by [orphan_account](#)

Summary

Charlie will try anything once, and then a few more times for good measure. Neil doesn't want any part in his experiments.

“Right, so truth or dare?” Pitts said. It was chilly in the Indian cave that night, but Meeks had managed to start a proper fire this time, neatly funneling the smoke up through a crack in the stone.

“Truth or dare?” Charlie moaned. “There’s no point without girls.”

“Well, Neil forgot the poetry book,” said Meeks, and Neil shrugged apologetically, “so unless someone’s got something memorized...”

“Nah.”

“Sorry.”

“Not this week.”

“Alright then.” Pitts called them to order. Charlie rolled his eyes. Todd looked anxious. Pitts glanced round the circle and his gaze landed on... “Knox. Truth or dare.”

“Um. Truth.”

Meeks whispered something to Pitts. Pitts laughed. “Knox, when was the last time you beat off to Chris Noel?”

“Two hours ago,” said Knox, with painful accuracy.

“All right, Knoxious!” Charlie applauded. “May you never go blind.”

“You’re up, Knox,” said Neil, looking at his watch. He still needed to practice his lines tonight; when he’d forgotten Mr. Keating’s book, he’d half-hoped they might pack it in for the night. But everyone else was ready for a good time, except, apparently, Charlie, who was smoking with a bored, languid air that suggested he’d rather be elsewhere.

Knox, still blushing a bit, scanned the faces. Todd twitched convulsively when they made eye contact; kindly, Knox passed him by. “Meeks.”

“Dare.” Meeks pushed his glasses up his nose.

“I dare you...” Knox cast about for an idea. With a wicked glint in his eye, Charlie leaned over and murmured something to Knox. Knox’s eyes bugged out a bit.

“Oh Jesus,” Meeks groaned. “It’s bad, isn’t it?”

Struggling to control his laughter, Knox said, “Steven, I dare you to

blow a raspberry on Cameron's neck."

Everyone howled with laughter, even Meeks, but Cameron scrambled to his feet. "No fucking way, no way I'm letting him do that!"

"Go on, Meeks!"

"Do it!"

"Don't be a pussy, Cameron!"

"Just get it over with, Cameron," Neil said, and because Neil was the leader Meeks got to his knees and crawled over to Cameron in what he might have imagined a seductive manner. Cameron glared, his face turning red to match his hair. "Stay away from me," he warned Meeks.

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much!" Charlie cackled. Pitts and Knox tackled Cameron and pinned him down as Meeks placed a loud, glorious raspberry on his neck. Cameron yelped and Meeks pulled away, still shaking with laughter. Cameron scrubbed frantically at his neck. "You're a bunch of sick assholes," he spat.

"It's just a bit of spit," Meeks told him. "I'll help you with Latin tomorrow if you want."

"The hell you will," Cameron said, his face still on fire. "I'm up."

"Actually, it's Steven's turn," Neil said. "That was his dare."

"I don't care, whatever," Meeks said, hastily peacemaking. "Cameron can have it if he wants. I don't mind."

Neil nodded assent.

Fuming, Cameron trained his eyes on the origin of his humiliation. "Dalton," he said.

Charlie ignored him, studiously observing the smoke spiraling from his cigarette.

"Dalton!"

Todd, speaking up for the first time: "Cameron, he wants to be called -"

"Okay, fine – Nuwanda."

Charlie looked up, raising his eyebrows.

“Truth or dare.”

“Dare,” Charlie said, as if stating the obvious.

“Nuwanda, I dare you...” Cameron smirked with relish. “I dare you to kiss Neil. On the lips. For thirty seconds.”

A collective gasp echoed through the cave. Even Charlie looked surprised. Neil’s mouth fell open. Todd’s eyes were enormous.

“... The fuck?” said Pitts at last.

“I think that’s crossing a line, Cameron,” said Knox, nervously.

“A little too far,” Neil said lightly, but his voice wavered. He cleared his throat. “Pick something else.”

Todd, Meeks and Pitts chorused agreement.

“A dare is a dare,” Cameron said smugly. “Unless Nuwanda is too chicken to carry it out.” They all knew Charlie had never turned down a dare. Last fall he’d swiped the communion wine, in the winter he’d rolled naked in the snow, and this past spring he’d got off with a college girl five years older than him. But now the air was tense, pregnant with nervy anticipation.

Charlie looked at them impassively. He flicked his cigarette into the fire. “A dare is a dare,” he said quietly. “Got your stopwatch ready, Cameron?”

Neil felt his muscles tense as Charlie slipped towards him, too paralyzed to open his mouth and call the whole stupid thing off. There was a roaring in his ears. Charlie crouched next to him. When they were nearly nose to nose, he thought he saw Charlie wink at him, almost imperceptibly. Then Charlie kissed him, hard. Charlie was throwing every bit of Cameron’s poison back in his face, almost seeming to enjoy –. It was a virtuosic performance, Neil had time to think, before his thoughts made themselves scarce. Charlie tangled his hands in Neil’s hair, his hot, open mouth pressed against Neil’s. Thoreau flashed through Neil’s brain – “to suck all the marrow out of life” – for surely, that was what Charlie was doing, nipping and biting at his lips, making his heart skip every other beat. He had never been kissed like this before. Then Charlie slipped his tongue into Neil’s mouth, and Neil had to suppress a groan. Suddenly he realized, with abject horror, that he had grown hard. He tried to shift his pelvis but Charlie moved with him, and then Neil could feel himself pressing

against Charlie's thigh. Charlie evidently felt it, too, for his busy tongue went still, and Neil was afraid to open his eyes, terrified of Charlie's expression, terrified of what Charlie might announce, then and there, before all their friends... But to his amazement, Charlie merely adjusted so he was crouching astride Neil's lap, effectively shielding the sight of his ballooning trousers from the onlookers. The kiss deepened, and Neil felt something hot building in his stomach –

“Time,” Cameron announced faintly.

Charlie flicked his tongue around Neil's mouth once more for good measure and then he broke the kiss. He turned around, still blocking Neil from the others' view. Neil pictured his father's face, then Mr. Nolan's, in alternating succession until he regained control of himself.

The cave was silent. Seven shocked faces stared back at them. Then Knox led everyone in the obligatory catcalling and applause. It rang hollowly through the cave and ended quickly.

“I think that's enough for one night,” Neil said, managing to muster up his old authority with the disappearance of his erection.

“Yeah, I've still got some trig,” Pitts seconded, untangling his gangly legs and getting to his feet. “Meeks?”

“Yeah, yeah, at your service,” Meeks said.

“I still have l-l-loads of L-Latin,” Todd put in, but Charlie's voice rang clearly through the cave.

“Happy, Cameron?” he asked, sounding almost bored. “Get you off for the evening?”

“Dalton-”

“The name's Nuwanda, shithead, don't make me tell you again. I'd have invited you along to watch me fuck Melanie last month, if I'd known you enjoyed watching so much.”

Melanie again, Neil thought, inexplicably annoyed.

Cameron made to lunge at Charlie, but Knox and Pitts easily restrained him. “Give it up, Cameron, you asshole,” Meeks advised.

“After all, I know where you sleep,” Charlie told his roommate, smirking, and led the way out of the cave. Neil stood up, angry and

confused and embarrassed, but he couldn't help but marvel at the way Charlie had turned Cameron into the joke of the evening.

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Neil leaned against the doorframe, torn between irritation and amusement as Charlie commenced his lesson in the empty classroom. Charlie donned his beret and deftly sketched the outlines of a naked woman on the blackboard. His audience, consisting of Knox, Meeks and Pitts, craned their necks.

"Come off it, Knox, you're just encouraging him," Neil drawled from the doorway. "You have to get her away from Danburry before you can seduce her."

"Silence, Mr. Perry, don't interrupt the lesson!" Charlie brandished his chalk. "Mr. Overstreet here as requested a private tutorial, which Mr. Meeks and Mr. Pitts have asked to audit, in the finer arts of lovemaking to the female species. In exchange for a week of Latin, I have generously obliged them."

Neil folded his arms. "Knox, he's just messing with you. You're risking another wallop from Chet Danburry."

"Shut up, Neil, you killjoy." In full Nuwanda mode, Charlie had discovered a wooden pointer, which he leveled at his audience. "Now, who knows how to begin?"

"Kissing, obviously," said Knox, who was taking this very seriously. "Right, Nuwanda?"

"Correct, Mr. Overstreet." Charlie drew a full, bow-shaped mouth on his diagram. "You kiss her. Not too hard. I suggest you alternate different amounts of pressure on the lips. Then?"

"Tongue?" Pitts guessed.

"Ve-ry good, Mr. Pitts! We'll have you kissing in no time. Tongue. It's a bit of a game, gentlemen. You've got to test the waters. Unleash it a little at a time. Just against the lips at first, and then you can slip it in once her mouth starts to open."

Neil, having experienced the results of this technique firsthand, shifted uncomfortably, but no one was looking at him. Goddammit, Charlie, he thought, willing himself to leave but remaining rooted to the spot. Perhaps he'd better pay attention. He'd had a couple tentative, chaste

kisses, and, last time, the girl had put her tongue in his mouth, but one of it bore much resemblance to what Charlie was describing, or, more accurately, to what he had experienced in the Indian Cave with Charlie a few nights ago.

“Who knows what to do next?” Charlie asked.

Meeks, studying the diagram: “Umm, tits?”

“No, Steven, ‘tits’ is incorrect! The correct answer, scholars, is neck. Where you leave your mark. Mark your territory. Suck on that soft, smooth skin ‘til you get a nice juicy bruise. If you’re lucky, she’ll give you one too.” The boys nodded earnestly. “Now,” Charlie said, “Mr. Meeks, take it away!”

“Tits!”

“Yes indeed, gentlemen. One of the finer parts of the female anatomy.” Charlie used the pointer to indicate the ample breasts of his diagram. Neil scanned the empty hallway to make sure no one was approaching. “It’s best to be stealthy. While you kiss her, you let one hand drift down... But no pawing, scholars! Women don’t like that. At least not early on.” He smirked. “Think of it more as a massage than a grab, depending on the size of the tits in question. You can bring your other hand into play if she hasn’t slapped you silly yet.”

“They always do,” Pitts said sadly.

“If you had followed all the previous steps I just outlined, Pitts, it wouldn’t have come to that,” Charlie said.

Knox was staring at the blackboard dreamily. “Chris’s got ace tits. And she wears those tight sweaters, and the fabric’s so thin you can almost-”

“Steady there,” Charlie commanded. “Actual removing of clothing doesn’t factor in ‘til next week’s lesson. In exchange for trigonometry.”

“So that’s it?” Knox said sadly.

“Knoxious, I just taught you how to get at her tits! How much further do you expect to go with a girl who’s already got a boyfriend. You’re not me, for God’s sake.”

“So we learn about taking off clothes next lesson?” confirmed Meeks, always the diligent student. “Because I’ve always wondered how-”

“There’s nothing else you think we should do? With the kissing and the tits?” interrupted Pitts. “How long do you have to wait to go under her clothes even if, you know, she’s still wearing them and all?”

Neil laughed in spite of himself.

“Fine, fine, I’ll throw you dogs a bone!” Charlie waved his pointer dramatically. “While you’re kissing her, you can take her by the hips and bring her in close, really close, and let her feel she’s got you going.”

Neil’s ears burned.

“And then?” Knox sounded breathless.

“And then, if you were me, which unfortunately for you, you’re not, you might put your hand up her skirt.”

“You’ve done that?” Knox gasped.

“Of course I’ve done that, Knoxious, I’ve had sex.”

Neil, so intent on keeping his face impassive, had neglected his watch. He sensed, rather than saw, someone standing just behind him. Oh God. Mr. Nolan. Dr. Hager. He chanced a peak out of the corner of his eye. Keating. He opened his mouth to blurt a warning.

“But I love Chris,” Knox was protesting, “with the purity of dew on a rose, twinkling in the sun on a Saturday morning! I would never presume-”

“You were happy enough when I was telling you how to do her tits,” Charlie barked. “But if you’re not ready to think about her vagina-” gasps and blushes. Neil wanted to sink into the floor – “then fine, you virgins can go play with your dew and your roses. Listen up.” Charlie cleared his throat and recited:

“Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, Lady, were no crime
We would sit down and think which way
To walk and pass our long love’s day.
But at my back I always hear
Time’s winged chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
Thy beauty shall no more be found

Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song; then worms shall try
That long preserved virginity,
And your quaint honour turned to dust,
And into ashes all my lust.
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.
Now therefore, while youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,
Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour
Than languish in his slow-chapt power.
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness into one ball,
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Through the iron gates of life:
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run."

Charlie looked straight at Mr. Keating. With a shiver of dread at his friend's daring, Neil realized that Charlie had known their teacher was there all along. "Anything to add, sir?" Charlie inquired.

Knox, Pitts and Meeks' heads whipped around, and they stared at their teacher with open-mouthed horror.

"An impressive performance, Mr. Dalton," Keating said.

Charlie took a small bow. Knox buried his head in his hands with a whimper of dismay.

"And most edifying. An excellent selection, Marvell. But surprising, isn't it, some of the imagery?"

"What do you mean, sir?" Charlie asked.

"From a whimsical discussion of patient, incremental love – which I notice you passed over, Mr. Dalton – Marvell suddenly skips to imagery that involves graves, marble vaults and worms. A bit unpleasant, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," Charlie agreed.

“The narrator’s use of such metaphors to depict a realistic and harsh death that awaits the lovers thus seems to be a way of shocking the lady into submission, does it not?”

“I never thought of it that way, sir,” Charlie considered, “But I think you’re right.” Neil raised his eyebrows. His friend never bowed to anyone else the way he bowed to Mr. Keating. “What would you suggest instead?”

“Something less aggressive, perhaps, something that makes no demands of the lady in question. A suitor should never manipulate, but only woo. Think of Lord Byron: “She walks in beauty, like the night / Of cloudless climes and starry skies...”

“But wasn’t Byron a leech, sir?” Meeks piped up.

“Certainly, Mr. Meeks, he might have been, but he was also a poet of the highest-”

“Byron,” Charlie interjected swiftly, “carried on with both women and men. Isn’t that right, sir?”

“Some of his poems suggest that may have been the case, yes,” Keating agreed. “Despite the hostility of the era, there was a notable cult of romantic friendships among boys at English private schools, well attested by such writers as Benjamin Disraeli, Leigh Hunt and Percy Shelley.”

Meeks and Pitts were giggling uncontrollably at this point. Charlie looked thoughtful.

“You recited well, Mr. Dalton,” Keating said, “but next time I suggest you take your lessons elsewhere, for smaller chance of interruption. Good afternoon, gentlemen.”

They listened to him walk away in hushed silence. Then Knox let out a low whistle. “Shit, Nuwanda, you got off scot-free.” The others laughed in relief.

Charlie shrugged nonchalantly. “As any independent thinker would recognize, I said nothing out of line. Besides, he was the one who told us language was developed to woo women.”

“You have a lot of fucking nerve,” Knox said.

“Well, that concludes today’s lecture, scholars.” Charlie bowed them

out of the classroom. Exiting, Neil noticed Charlie's picture of the naked woman was still on the board. Charlie saw him notice, and winked conspiratorially. Neil frowned.

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Knox's next lesson took place in the cave before the Dead Poets convened.

"Praxis!" Charlie crowed, as if speaking to a much larger audience than just Knox and Neil. "In which theory is put into practice."

"Nuwanda pretends to scrape by," Neil remarked idly, "but rumor has it he's closing in on a high 'A' for English this term."

"Silence, disciple!" Charlie commanded. "Overstreet, this is your praxis. Apply last week's lesson to that wall over there."

"You want me to kiss the cave?" said Knox. "Jesus, do you think Chris will be that unyielding?"

"Knowing your luck, probably," said Charlie.

Knox moved to the wall but recoiled. "Charlie, it's filthy!"

"Call me Nuwanda, and fine, practice on your arm then."

Dubiously, Knox rolled up his sleeve and sucked at his forearm half-heartedly. "Chris is definitely not this hairy."

"What do you want me to tell you, Overstreet? Practice makes perfect. Why don't you kiss Neil?"

"No way!" they chorused in horror.

"I'm out of suggestions," said Charlie.

"What if I – do you think I –"

"What, Knox?"

"Dammit, Charlie, I'm desperate. Can I just – oh fuck it, can I just practice on you?"

Charlie raised an eyebrow. "You want to kiss me?"

"Well, no, it's not that I want to kiss you, per se, but I have to be good

at it before I see Chris again, preferably better than Danburry, and girls practice on each other all the time, don't they, so she's bound to know if I'm not doing it properly. You have to teach me. Jesus Christ, Charlie, do you think I'd ask if I wasn't desperate? This is probably the most embarrassing thing I've ever done, next to getting beaten up by Danburry. You're the only one I can ask, c'mon, please?"

Say no, Neil thought in spite of himself.

"Fine," Charlie said.

Neil felt a flicker of anger. He snuffed it out.

Charlie stood with his arms folded. "I'm Chris, you're you. Go."

Knox blinked. "Okay, um. Chris, you're looking really lovely tonight."

"Don't try and fucking seduce me," Charlie snarled.

"Right, yeah."

Knox leaned in and clumsily pecked Charlie's mouth. It wasn't very impressive; even Neil, watching from several feet away, could see that.

"I give you one-and-a-half out of ten," Charlie said, pulling away. "That has to be the worst kiss I've ever had. You don't just purse your mouth on her, Knox, or you're going to die a virgin. You have to engage with her. Try again." He folded his arms impassively.

Knox did a bit better this time, managing to extend the kiss for a few seconds. This time, he broke it off. "Isn't she – I mean, aren't you, supposed to open your mouth?"

"Only if you've earned it," Charlie said. "And you most certainly haven't. I'll give you one more shot."

Knox lurched at Charlie, and this time, when their mouths touched, Charlie grabbed Knox by the arms, forcefully holding him in place. Neil saw Charlie's lips part slightly and dug his fingernails into his palms.

Charlie released Knox. "Better," he said. "You don't have to move your tongue around so much, for God's sake, you're not cleaning her teeth."

"But I was alright?"

"You won't completely humiliate yourself on a first kiss, if you ever get that far," Charlie said.

Muted snatches of conversation announced the approach of the others.

"I can't believe my first grown-up kiss was Charlie Dalton," Knox groaned.

"All the women in the world would be so lucky," Charlie said.

"Don't tell the others, alright?"

"Course not, or they'll all want lessons too, won't they?"

"Don't flatter yourself, Nuwanda," Neil said as their friends tramped in, kicking snow from their boots. His tone was uncharacteristically sharp; Charlie shot him a look.

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Neil was running through his lines a few nights later when Charlie knocked on the door and let himself in without waiting for a reply. He sat cross-legged on Todd's empty bed, facing Neil.

"You're mad at me."

"I'm not mad at you. I'm just trying to practice my lines. The show is less than a week away."

"You've been word-perfect for days. You're gonna be great. Why are you avoiding me?"

"I'm not."

"You think I'm so full of myself that I can't see when you're holding back?"

"I'm not."

"I'll say it if you won't."

"Say what?" Neil snapped, his heart beginning to pound. He worried Charlie would hear its racket from across the room.

"I talk about sex all the time. You're used to it. You're used to me. I've always told you everything, about Melanie, about-

“Sure, fine, but I’m not in the mood right now.”

“You didn’t like it when I showed Knox how to kiss Chris. And you can’t decide if you liked it when Cameron dared me to kiss you.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Neil tried to sound dismissive, “that was just a dare.”

“It wasn’t though, was it?”

“Stop fucking... implying things.” Neil began to feel desperate. His face was hot. “So you’re more experienced than the girls I’ve kissed. I reacted. Biologically. It was something new.”

“Neil-”

“I’m not stupid. I know you did it to make an ass out of Cameron. And thanks for not telling the others what happened, but that’s all there was to it. A biological reaction to a, a, a, chemical one.” I’m stammering like Todd, Neil thought.

“Neil.” Charlie ran a hand through his hair and a rebellious cowlick swept against his brow. “I liked it.”

“Y-you did?” Neil cursed his wobbly voice. He was such a fucking sissy sometimes.

“Yeah, I did. It was new, like you said. I like new.”

“I’m not your experiment, Charlie. You’ve had sex, so now you think you’re ready to play at really deviant stuff-”

“It’s not deviant, Keating as good as said so,” Charlie reminded him. “Byron and Shelley. Besides, I’m curious. I like girls. I liked kissing you, too. So what?”

“Stop it,” Neil said. “Stop. It’s just hormones, Mr. Keating said that too. So go away and rub one out, that always worked for you before Melanie.”

“You won’t want to jerk off anymore, Neil, once you’ve had sex.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I know exactly what I’m saying. Who cares, Neil? It doesn’t mean anything momentous or permanent. Kissing me and enjoying it doesn’t make you Oscar Wilde. It doesn’t make you anything.”

“What about you?”

“You know me, I’ll try anything once, and then a few more times for good measure,” Charlie grinned. He looked so at ease and so pleased with himself that Neil had to smile a tiny bit.

“This is the weirdest conversation I’ve ever had,” he said. “Jesus, Charlie. You’re crazy.”

“C’mon, be impulsive,” said Charlie. “Remember when you auditioned for the play? You followed an impulse. You’ve been following impulses all term. Last year’s Neil never would’ve proposed a midnight poetry club, either.”

“I guess,” Neil admitted. “But this is so weird. I mean, Charlie, think about what you’re saying.”

“It’s just *carpe diem*. Gathering experiences. You want to make your life extraordinary, extra-ordinary, just like I do.”

“If I were to – if I said – what would we do? I mean...”

“I dunno, Neil,” Charlie said thoughtfully. “I s’pose we could mess around a little bit.”

They stared at each other, awkwardly. Charlie was the first to crack up. “This is too ridiculous,” he laughed.

Neil’s smile froze on his lips. “You’ve changed your mind.”

“No Neil, you twerp, I haven’t changed my mind. Close your eyes.”

Reluctantly, Neil complied. His senses were on hyper-alert. He clutched at his bedsheets for dear life.

Charlie kissed him, sweetly and softly. Neil jumped. “Relax,” Charlie breathed against his mouth. “Follow my lead.”

Charlie leaned into him, cupping Neil’s face between his hands and deepening the kiss. Neil let himself be pushed back against the wall as Charlie followed him onto the bed. It was weird, thought the tiny part of Neil’s brain that remained aloof from the proceedings, but not altogether wrong.

Charlie was straddling his lap, like in the cave, but this time he ground their pelvises together and created such an astonishing friction that Neil felt himself spring to life. How did Charlie know how to do

this, he wondered, and as if reading his mind, Charlie whispered, “Making it up as I go along.” He rocked hard against Neil and dexterously loosened Neil’s tie and unbuttoned his collar. “Shirts off now?” he suggested.

They worked themselves out of their uniform shirts and regarded each other. Charlie was pale but toned from rowing, and Neil’s skin was burnished a light bronze. This time they both howled with laughter. “Sorry, sorry,” Neil couldn’t stop giggling. “I don’t know what I was expecting.”

“Not tits, I hope.”

“No, no, I don’t know...”

“Something different than you see in the showers everyday?” Charlie lunged back on top of Neil, kissing him roughly as he propelled him flat onto his back. He caught Neil’s nipple between his teeth, apparently curious to see if he’d react the same way girls did when he teased their breasts, but Neil said “ouch!” and jerked away. So that’s different, then.

“Neil...”

“Mmh?” Neil inhaled sharply when Charlie found his erection through his trousers.

“I’m going to try something, okay?”

Neil grunted something incoherent. The heat of Charlie’s hand was burning through the fabric of his clothes, driving him wild. He was squirming so wildly he missed Charlie deftly undoing his buttons and zippers, and he was astonished when his hard-on sprung free, not a few scant inches from Charlie’s face. And Charlie’s eyes, hooded and mysterious, were running up and down his length, appraisingly –

“Fuck!” He all but shouted.

Because Charlie was doing something completely appalling and totally disgusting, and he’d never felt anything so wondrous in his life. Up and down, up and down Charlie’s mouth went, a little farther each time. When he raised his hips to meet him he heard Charlie gag and he yelped when teeth came in contact with his sensitive flesh, but Charlie moved past the gag and sped up, his head bobbing wildly.

Neil was moaning incoherently, trying to warn Charlie what was

about to happen, but he couldn't find the words, the words... He tugged Charlie's hair, but that just made Charlie groan deep in his throat and the vibrations put him over the edge. He came violently, and Charlie... Charlie...

When his vision cleared, Charlie was smirking above him, using his tongue to catch a drop of cum running down his chin. Neil felt as winded as if he'd run a race, and there was Charlie, smiling, looking as smug as the cat that got the, well, cream. The thought made him laugh, and Charlie was laughing too.

"I can't believe you actually did that!" Neil exclaimed.

"And I can't believe you came that much!" Charlie retorted. Then he smirked. "You can't tell me you didn't enjoy it."

Neil blushed, beginning to feel the first touches of shame. He quickly fastened up his trousers. "I – but we... did you -?"

"I wanted to try that," Charlie said. "I mean, it's not like I can do it on a girl."

"Has a girl ever – on you?"

"Fuck no," Charlie said. "They hate doing it, apparently."

Talking about girls was making Neil feel edgy. He wasn't sure what he had been laughing at a moment ago, but now he felt... Strange. Dislocated. Charlie was there, right next to him, looking and acting exactly like Charlie, whereas he, Neil, had undergone some kind of transformation and couldn't remember how to act like himself. "Do you want me to try and do it to you?" he asked abruptly.

"No Neil, I don't want you biting my cock off, thanks very much!" Charlie slapped him on the shoulder and Neil felt hurt. "I'll be needing it."

Neil remembered. "You're going home for the weekend, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"You'll see Melanie."

"Probably."

"Oh." If he was going to cry, he couldn't do it in front of Charlie. He cast about for an excuse to get away – dinner, homework...

“Neil,” Charlie said gently, “I can’t change who I am.”

“I know.”

“When I promised you that nothing would change, it wasn’t just you I meant.”

“I know.”

“If you wanted to – sometimes I’ve thought Todd might-”

“Shut up.” Shut up shut up shut up shut up shut –

Charlie rested his forehead against Neil’s. “Everything will be okay, I promise.”

“No it won’t,” Neil said aloud to the empty room once Charlie had left.

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“Neil! Neil, stop!”

Neil ignored him and continued to sprint through the forest, tripping on branches and fallen trees in the dark. He could hear himself gasping, see his frosty breath fanning out before him.

“Slow down, wait for me!”

“Leave me alone!” Neil shouted. “Fuck off!” The snow was falling more swiftly now, if he could just lose him, and make it to the cave, not far now –

His foot caught on a rock. He tripped and fell spectacularly, landing facedown in the snow with his knees and elbows smarting. The rushing footsteps grew louder and he staggered to his feet.

“Neil!”

Neil clutched his fists and took a wild swing at his pursuer. His left hook missed entirely but his right came in solid contact with a cheekbone. There was a grunt, and then Neil found himself facedown in the snow again, his opponent sitting heavily on his back.

“What the fuck are you doing, Neil?” Charlie demanded breathlessly.

“I told you, leave me alone!”

“You’re my best friend!” Charlie shouted back. “I heard what your dad said, okay? I know he said you can’t be in the play.”

“Get off me.”

“Only if you come back with me.”

“No!”

“Then I’ll just sit here,” Charlie said. Exhausted, Neil stopped struggling and just lay there, letting the cold seep into his bones. Neither of them said anything for a moment. The only sound was the wind through the trees.

“You scared me,” Charlie said at last. “The look on your face, the way you just took off...”

“The show opens tomorrow.”

“I know.”

“I’m fucked, it’s all fucked-”

“What did Keating say?”

“He said I should talk to my dad, tell him what acting means to me. The truth. Keating doesn’t know my dad.”

“Your dad is a cunt,” Charlie said.

Neil choked on a face-full of snow. “Charlie-”

“He’s a cunt. Look, there I said it again. Keating doesn’t know what you’re up against. Neil, just do the damn play.”

“I gave him my word. My dad.”

“So what? He’ll never find out, and hell, if he does – it’ll be worth it, right? He can beat you til your ass turns purple, but you’ll still have played Puck.”

“Charlie.”

“I’m right. You know I’m right.”

“You’re crushing me.”

“I’m not letting you up until you promise that you’ll do it.”

Neil didn’t say anything for a time. He was numb with cold, he could hear the trees, his face was wet with snow and snot and Charlie was solid weight against him. “I promise.”

Charlie clambered off and pulled him to his feet. His teeth were chattering.

“C’mon,” Charlie said. Neil allowed himself to be led by the hand like a child, too frozen to register Charlie guiding him into the cave instead of back to the school. He watched Charlie light a fire, coaxing the embers to life, blowing on the first timid flames until they flared up into golden warmth, casting shadows on the cave walls.

Charlie took off his coat and laid it down on the damp layer of trodden leaves. He knelt and waited on it, but Neil seemed to have lost his motor skills so Charlie got up again and brought him to the fire. He began to divest Neil of his damp outer things, mis-buttoned coat and trailing scarf. Neil shivered as every button was released, both from the cold and the strange intimacy of it, Charlie taking care of him... Charlie’s face was mostly in shadow, but Neil could see the concerned line drawn between his brows, his eyes burning in their deep sockets, for once empty of all irony and mockery. They’d hardly spoken since Charlie returned from his weekend away, Neil busy with dress rehearsals, and Charlie... Dreaming of Melanie? Neal wondered.

Something like bile rose in his throat and suddenly he was desperate to pull his coat back on and run away as fast as he could. But his hands were shaking too hard. It wasn’t until Charlie covered his cold hands with his own, and drew them to his lips, breathing and kissing a little warmth over the fingers, that Neil could hush the little voice in his mind that whispered insistent thoughts of flight. Suddenly it was too late for anything like that, and he couldn’t even pretend that was what he wanted anymore, not really, now that Charlie was pulling his shirt over his head, helping him out of his shoes and trousers, silent and intent on his task.

Fuck it, right? He thought, but apparently he’d said it aloud because Charlie grinned and repeated, “Fuck it.” The sureness in Charlie’s motions was telling him that they were going to commit some sort of sin tonight, and he wanted it. Not just because of his father, or because of the play. No, he realized, the danger inherent in this sort of sin was all a part of what he had been told, all his life, part of those rules of living that had more to do with propriety and breeding and

fear than with actual life or living. Those errant thoughts weren't real; reality was Charlie holding his hands and kissing them so softly, until he could once again feel the rush of blood through them.

Neil realized that he was naked. He lay down shivering on Charlie's outstretched coat and waited, watching. Charlie's skin was very pale, almost glowing as he quickly shed his clothes and joined Neil, covering his body with his own. Neil could feel the bite of the air against his nose and cheeks, but everything else – everywhere Charlie was touching him – was erupting in little flames of heat. More than just the thrill of the forbidden contact was Charlie's weight on top of him, the certainty that Charlie was aroused too, the heat transferred from one body to another.

There was more heat to be had in kisses, and in touches; Charlie lowered his head down to Neil's and drew him into a kiss that flamed and spread over the rest of his body, heating his skin. Cold fingers trailed over his body and made him shiver anew, not quite with cold, and they pressed together full-length, and the delicious heaviness almost made him come then and there. The encounter in his bedroom, which he'd spent the weekend playing over in his brain, picking it apart and trying to understand – even that had nothing on this, so bare and raw and exposed. There was nowhere to hide, not here, and as they rubbed against each other with increasing urgency, Neil saw a fear in Charlie's eyes that mirrored his own. Charlie, afraid...

Neil closed his eyes, clenched his hands against Charlie's bare back, and bit his lip. He didn't want to be here, suddenly; it was all too much, too soon, and his back ached and he was freezing and he wanted to be warm and safe in bed. If Charlie was afraid, then he was more afraid than ever. He struggled a little, and then Charlie kissed him again, and reached between their bodies to touch him, and he was lost.

Charlie sucked on his fingers, making them wet and shiny with spit. Neil closed his eyes and abandoned himself to the strange, stretching, teasing sensation and felt himself floating away. And then Charlie entered him and he made a muffled sound into Charlie's mouth, somewhere between a cry and a moan. Charlie moved ever so slowly, his eyes locked on Neil's.

It hurt Neil to look at Charlie; it hurt him to look at him and feel him inside him and know where this pleasure came from. He tried to keep his eyes closed and clamped his mouth so the sudden rush of joy in what they were doing wouldn't be heard, but it was so hard to contain

it. His body wouldn't cooperate at all. His hips thrust wildly upwards so Charlie penetrated even deeper inside him, craving more, more more, and Charlie wouldn't let him go. Neil drew so close to the edge that it hurt and he wanted to shout for Charlie to stop, to stop fucking him like this, but he couldn't – and then he was coming, spattered drops of heat and shame warm against his belly, and still the thrusting continued until there was nothing left, and his eyes filled with hot tears.

Charlie held him while he wept. Neil tried to push him away, but he couldn't speak clearly through his tears and Charlie wouldn't let go. Neil finally gave up and clung to him, desperately, muffling his sobs against the shoulder that he had bruised and kissed and bitten earlier. When he stilled, finally, completely drained and incapable of moving or speaking or even crying anymore, Charlie kissed him, over and over, and thrust into him twice more, and came inside him, without the tears.

Neil didn't want to go anywhere, just wanted to lie there for the rest of his life and sleep, until he died or the world ended, whichever came first. He was wrapped in Charlie's arms; Charlie had tried to say something but Neil couldn't reply, so Charlie was quiet too.

It was all so terrible, so awful. There were no words to describe it. Neil knew now why love like this was a sin and why they had been warned, all their lives. The want had been bad enough, but there was always the hope underneath it that kept them pure, the hope that perhaps giving in to desire would be worse than the ache of that unrelenting need. Now Neil knew the truth, and it was horrible: he would always want this, always want to feel what he had felt here, with Charlie. There would never be anything else which would be as wonderful as this feeling. Now he would always want, he would always know, and it would draw him back here or places like this, shadowed and hidden, again and again. He wanted to go back to not knowing, to hollow-eyed fear and aching desire and innocence. He didn't know how he could ever act the part of Neil Perry again, when everything that Neil Perry had known had been lost.

At last, Charlie stirred and picked through the tangle of clothes, separating them. Neil moved, reluctantly; it would be light soon, and they had to get back in time to start pretending. Of course no one could ever know, not even their friends – especially not their friends; the secret was theirs alone. He didn't know how he would ever be able to look Charlie in the eyes again – or Todd, or any of the others – without thinking of this place, or how he would be able to come back

here, no matter how cold it was, without the heat of desire surging through his bones.

Charlie grasped his hand when they were dressed, and they walked together to the mouth of the cave. The stars were still bright in the sky; they stood and watched them through the trees for a while. Then Charlie kissed him, for a long time, and it was different than it had been, before, with less urgency and more promise.

“Tomorrow night – after the play,” Charlie whispered.

Neil nodded.

“It’s changed for me, too,” said Charlie.

They walked back to school without touching.

*

Exactly twenty-four hours later, Charlie was in the bathroom having a cigarette, blowing smoke out the window, shivering, and wondering when Neil would be back. He never returned to school that night, and Charlie hadn’t slept, either, torn between fear and desire and impatience and then finally a creeping sense of dread.

He heard the phone ring in the hallway. He heard Dr. Hager’s door creak open, heard him shuffle down the hall and pick up the receiver. He heard at first annoyance, then confusion, and then something else altogether.

Neil.

Charlie stood at the window and watched the first rays of light glimmer on the horizon. He thought about the way Neil shivered when he touched him, remembered the wetness of his cheeks, rosy with the cold and the sorrow, and how he had kissed them. How he had held on to him and thrust down as he thrust up, the way Neil arched his neck as he bit into him.

Charlie gripped him tightly, afraid he might disappear into his imagination. How clean and glittering the snow seemed, and how cold.

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